

1. HESYCHASM AND THEOLOGY¹

PROFESSOR GEORGIOS I. MANTZARIDES

Abstract: My work here clarifies the Orthodox theological term “*hesychia*” and relates it to specific Orthodox Christian uses of the terms “asceticism” and “theology”. The Orthodox use of the term *hesychia*, when related to specific biblical and patristic references, makes explicit its dynamic character, and in this way, it transforms it into a unique term in Christian Theology, quite different when compared to other (non-Orthodox) uses. Contrary to recent attempts to reduce the meaning, scope, and depth of *hesychia*, it is argued here that *hesychia* can be the only authentic source for a meaningful change in the Christian Church and Christian Theology.

Keywords: hesychia, theoptia, theologia, theoria, Palamas, St Symeon the New Theologian, St Basil the Great.

Hesychasm is not simply a theological trend nor an ecclesiastical system but a phenomenon that transcends trends and systems. Furthermore, hesychasm cannot be limited to any particular period in the history of monasticism, such as, for example, that of the fourteenth century when the erudite Varlaam of Calabria turned against the monks of Holy Mt Athos and caused the famous *hesychastic controversy*. Hesychasm is the cultivation of *hesychia* (in the original Greek *ἡσυχία*), a unique and diachronic characteristic of Orthodox monasticism. But what are the content and true form of *hesychia*?

Hesychia is most commonly identified with stillness, in opposition to restlessness; or it is considered as having the same meaning as relaxation or resting (in opposition to being busy or doing any kind of work). In other words, it is frequently considered to be an exterior and primarily physical state, without some special spiritual or mental content and immediate relation to the interior, mental and spiritual, human life.

¹ Translation: Dr C. Athanasopoulos 2017.

This usual (physical or bodily) sense is synonymous with what the Holy Fathers call *argia* (ἀργία i.e., not working, remaining idle) and cannot be associated with what they term *hesychia*. In the Orthodox tradition, *hesychasm* has a very distinct meaning, which is quite different from what many scholars think. It is not (simply) stillness, nor (simply) rest. It is not considered to be some kind of common social activity, nor even just one of the moral (Christian or other social) virtues. *Hesychia* is the “higher endeavour” (Γρηγορίου Θεολόγου, *Λόγος εις εαυτόν* 26, 7; PG35, 1237B) and the “most perfect of the virtues” (Συμεών Νέου Θεολόγου, *Ηθικά* 15, 1 in Darrouzès 1967, p.444). It is the path that leads to divine knowledge, the goal of which is *theoria* (θεωρία) or the vision of God. The virtues, which are called “the fulfilment of the divine commands through work” are only the first stage and a part of the pre-requisites for keeping oneself on the path towards *theoria*. According to Symeon the New Theologian: “The Apostles and the Holy Fathers who were ordained by them did not see *hesychia* as more important than the good works [i.e., the virtues] but, showing their faith through the fulfilment of the [divine] commands, they became worthy of God’s love in [divine] knowledge. Also, as they lawfully competed and always kept the knowledge of God in love, as the prize of their victory in continuously wishing to be with Him, they stayed outside the arena of worldly pursuits and the restlessness of the turmoil of worldly endeavours. Furthermore, by competing lawfully, they remained without care and involvement with worldly affairs that can only bring pain and sorrow” (Συμεών Νέου Θεολόγου, *Ηθικά* 15, 153-162 in Darrouzès 1967, pp.454-456).

Hesychia was never preferred to having obedience to the commandments in the life of the Church. Furthermore, any disregard for keeping the commandments is considered to be the opposite of *hesychia*. The *hesychast* (i.e., the one who has *hesychia*), driven by his love towards God, faithfully keeps God’s commands and so becomes worthy of the knowledge of God. The one who is in *hesychia* has an intense desire to remain in God’s love that overcomes him and, in this way, he stays away from the arena of turmoil and worldly-caused restlessness, embracing the “Holy Fire” of *hesychia*, a point which allows him to “listen carefully to Jesus’ *hesychia*” (Ιγνατίου Αντιοχείας, *Προς Εφεσίους* 15, 2). For this reason, the model and prototype of the *hesychastic* life in Orthodox *hesychasm* is the Mother of God who embraces in her arms the Holy Fire: Jesus Christ (*Απολυτίκιον Παναγίας Παραμυθίας*).

Keeping the commandments is the manifestation of the love of man towards God and brings man closer to the knowledge of God: “He who has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one

who loves me is going to be loved by my father; I love him, and I will show myself to him” (John 14:21). But, this condition of mental and spiritual hesychasm is greater in importance than keeping the commandments. While keeping the commandments, which is most commonly termed *praxis* in the ascetic tradition, can lead one to *theoria* (which for the Fathers of the Church is the knowledge and vision of God), mental and spiritual *hesychia* is, in essence, the condition in which divine *theoria* is achieved and without which *theoria* cannot exist. This condition of mental and spiritual *hesychia* can only be reached through a continuous concentration of the mind and avoidance of worldly distractions. It is for this reason that St John of Sinai (St John of the Ladder), the teacher of hesychasm, stipulates, as the first step in his *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, the renunciation of all worldly pursuits (ἀποταγή). No one, he writes, can enter the heavenly bridal chamber if he does not achieve the triple renunciation: a) of things and humans; b) of one’s own will; and c) of vanity and vainglory (Ιωάννου Σινάϊτου, Κλίμαξ 2, 14; PG88, 657A).

Naturally, to live in *hesychia* one should exist in an appropriate external environment. One cannot achieve *hesychia* within the turmoil and noise of worldly-oriented life pursuits. This is true, more than ever, for current patterns of life, even though there are notable exceptions. *Hesychia* is primarily a condition of the soul; more particularly of the mind. When the human mind stops being distracted by worldly affairs through the sense organs, it comes back into itself and, through itself, “it ascends to thoughts about God” (Μ. Βασιλείου, Επιστολή 2, 2; PG32, 228A). *Hesychia* is primarily lived in isolation and the desert. This is the reason that some of the greatest Hesychasts usually lived in the desert and/or in isolation for a major part of their lives.

In relation to coming close to God and divine knowledge, there is a frequent reference to the Psalm verse: “be still and know that I am God” (Ψαλμ. 45, 11: “σκολάσατε καὶ γνῶτε ὅτι ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ Θεός”; KJV: 46: 10: “Be still, and know that I am God”). This is often taken as referring to an exterior stillness. Here the noun *scholē* (σχολή), and the verb used in the Psalm, which is a derivative of this noun (in the original Greek of the Seventy this is: σκολάσατε) are taken to refer to abstinence from any work; in other words, an exterior form of *hesychia*. Such an interpretation of *scholē* has no positive content and cannot assist us in the knowledge of God: “Divine knowledge cannot be achieved with an external stillness. What is conducive to this is *hesychia* that is perfected in a good and lawful struggle [with the passions]” (Συμεών Νέου Θεολόγου, Ηθικά 15, 135-139 in Darrouzès 1967, p.454). Someone, who does not observe the commandments through an intense spiritual struggle, remains still in both

domains (worldly and spiritual) and this is most certainly a sin (Συμμεών Νέου Θεολόγου, *Ηθικά* 15, 103-106 in Darrouzès 1967, p.452). Divine knowledge does not come as a result of exterior stillness, even though exterior stillness may be useful for it. Nor is hesychasm confined to nor restrained by exterior stillness.

Orthodox hesychasm is a lived condition. It presupposes keeping the commandments and cultivating the virtues. When the one who struggles with his passions becomes experienced in *praxis* (i.e., when he has successfully struggled to reach the virtues “lawfully and well”), he is deemed worthy of remaining focused in *theoria*. The enjoyment of this divine vision is true hesychasm which is a mental and spiritual hesychasm. St Gregory the Theologian, presenting these two forms of ascetic life, writes the following: “Which one do you prefer *praxis* or *theoria*? Divine vision (*theoria*) is for those who are perfect, *praxis* is for most. Both are conducive to each other and assist each other. You just have to prefer the one that suits you more.” (Γρηγορίου Θεολόγου, *Ἐπη ηθικά* 33; PG37, 928A). Both forms of ascetic life are termed good and should be sought after. Each is called to prefer the one that suits him more. *Praxis* is suited to the many and *theoria* to the few. St Gregory the Theologian preferred *theoria*, and was led to it not so much by his peculiar spiritual and mental character but by his irresistible divine love (*eros*) for the “good and the *hesychia*” that he felt within himself (Γρηγορίου Θεολόγου, *Απολογητικός της εις Πόντον φυγής* 6; PG35, 413B). St Gregory’s good friend, St Basil the Great, seemed to have preferred *praxis*. He posited it as the foundation of the monastic habit.

In relation to St Basil’s views on *praxis* and *theoria*, some claim that he (St Basil) thought that being alone or in the desert was incompatible with the social nature of humans and that he (St Basil) allowed this kind of monasticism (being secluded and avoiding social contact) only for hermits and ascetic monks, as an exception to the rule. This interpretation of St Basil’s work is, I think, too simplistic. Appearances here deceive us. St Basil the Great lived, intensely, the *hesychia* of the hesychasts and highlighted its significance for a true spiritual life. His hesychastic life was the stable foundation upon which he based his unmatched pastoral and social work. Seen in this way, one can better understand St Basil’s fearless responses to the local ruler [*Eparch*] Modestos and his voluntary distribution of all the riches he inherited from his parents to the poor. According to St Basil the Great, if one has his mind fragmented and dispersed, “he cannot achieve love for God nor love for one’s neighbour” (Μ. Βασιλείου, *Ὅροι κατά πλάτος* 5, 1; PG31, 920B). It is also significant that he emphasises in his texts the biblical verse:

“Beware lest there be a wicked thought in your heart” (Δευτ. 15, 9). In an oration on this topic, he notes: “Beware and attend to yourself; attend not to things that belong to you nor to people who are related to you but attend to your own self” (M. Βασιλείου, *Ομιλία εις το «πρόσεχε σεαυτώ»* 2; PG31, 201A). *Hesychia* is not the result of *praxis*, but a presupposition of its correct application. *Praxis* properly conceived can only be the fruit of *hesychia*. The precise and correct observation of the double command of love (Love of God and Love of one’s neighbour; Mark 12:30-31) presupposes the unification of the fragmented man, the focus and concentration of the mind and the soul, and mental and spiritual *hesychia*. St Basil the Great did not prefer the isolation of hermitages, which could be easily established by transforming the semi-secluded communities within which the faithful of his time lived. He did not prefer them, because he had already exercised and matured within *hesychia*, achieving *theoptia* (vision of God), as is evidenced in his writings: “The mind that is elevated towards God can see great visions [of God] and see the divine beauty, only to the degree that divine grace has allowed him to see and his state of mind and soul can receive” (M. Βασιλείου, *Επιστολή Αμφιλοχίω Επισκόπω* 233, 1; PG32, 865D). Wishing to remove the danger of fragmentation and self-love, which is usually the result of a secluded isolationist life for the many, he strongly supported the monastic life within a commune (M. Βασιλείου, *Όροι κατά πλάτος* 7, 1-2; PG31, 929A-932A). But he also stipulated the pre-requisites of self-denial and the denial of worldly things as part of the promise a novice has to make to enter a monastic community; in this way, St Basil provided firm foundations for monastic communities and allowed hesychasm and divine grace to play their role. St Basil defined this denial as “transferring the human heart to the divine realm” (M. Βασιλείου, *Όροι κατά πλάτος* 7, 3; PG 31, 940C). This dimension of the monastic tradition, but also of the wider Christian life was further developed by his brother, St Gregory of Nyssa, in his wonderful spiritual and hesychastic writings.

Orthodox monasticism was from the beginning hesychastic. And the ancient monk, living away from the worldly affairs and practicing incessant prayer was, in essence, a Hesychast (Ιω. Μάγεντόρφ 1965, στ. 83). It was necessary to find refuge in *hesychia* so that he “will talk to God without getting his mind and soul cloudy and cluttered” (Γρηγορίου Θεολόγου, *Λόγος εις εαυτόν* 26, 7; PG35, 1237A). But this is essential for any real Christian believer. So, we can see that *hesychia* is a fundamental characteristic of the ecclesiastical mentality and perspective on things. It is Mary’s “good part, which will not be taken away from her” mentioned in Luke 10:42, which was named “good” by the Lord himself and it is mentioned and praised in all Orthodox tradition. In this way, we can

understand the familiarity and ease with which all the members of the Orthodox Church relate to what is described in the ascetic writings and what is preserved in the *Philokalia* and the texts of Sts Isaac the Syrian, Ephraim the Syrian, John of the Ladder, Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain and many others.

Hesychia is (and should always be) a method in *ascesis* and a way of life for all Christians. As is seen in the field of ethics, so in the life of the faithful, it does not appear all at once or in portions, but unfolds dynamically with a continuous effort of self-denial and total dependence on the will of God; this is achieved primarily in monasticism and through obedience. As the monk goes through the process of cleansing himself from all his passions and the keeping of the commandments, he achieves, through obedience to his spiritual father, a clean mind and a clean heart. In this way, he lives *hesychia* as *hesychia* of the mind and the heart. He lives it as a union of the mind to the heart or in other words as a concentration into “the hidden man within the heart” (1 Pet. 3:4), where the clear reflection of God’s truth can become possible. Here *hesychia* is no longer ascetic, but it has become truly charismatic. It is a state of clarity in the soul, according to which man, free from all interior turmoil and messiness of this world, can transcend himself and surrender to the *theoria* of God. In this state of clarity, man becomes intentionally transparent to God and becomes known to God, because God wants him; he knows God because he is aligned to His will. For this reason, in the truly authentic charismatic life achieved through divine grace and *hesychia*, according to Elder Sophrony of Essex, “*ascesis* is no more” (Αρχιμ. Σωφρονίου (Σαχάρωφ) 2010, p.212). In this state, the passions have been overcome and *ascesis*, thus, has no reason for existence.

In the circles of academic theology, there was once a strong debate on the biblical foundations of hesychasm: what is its purpose and on what divine command is it based, when all gospel commands can be summarised, as it is known, on the double command of love? This kind of questioning is of course essential, but these questions remain unanswerable if one remains within the realm of academic theology. Certainly, there is wide biblical support for *hesychia* and hesychasm in the verse of the psalms: “Be still and know that I am God” (Ψαλμ. 45, 11; KJV: Ps. 46: 10; see above for a theological analysis and interpretation of the passage). This verse is often given a strictly practical significance without taking into account any wider or deeper impact. This is the way (for example) that the Byzantine humanists understood the meaning of the verse and this is why St Symeon the New Theologian reacted in his work against this humanistic interpretation (Συμεών Νέου Θεολόγου, *Ηθικά* 15,

135-138 in Darrouzès 1967, p.454). There are also, of course, many examples found in the Holy Bible, such as when Prophet Elijah went to Mt Choreb (III Kings 19:11-12) and St John the Baptist sought refuge in the desert, becoming the voice that cries in the wilderness (see John 1:23, where John uses a prophecy to describe him; see Isaiah 40:3), or even when Jesus Himself went to the *hesychia* of the desert to pray (Matt. 4:1 and 14:13; Mark 1:12-13 and 1:35; Luke 4:1 and 5:16). But, these are not considered capable of justifying hesychasm. There are many people, even today, who consider *hesychia* to be invalid in some way because it disregards action (*praxis*). They do not comprehend that without *hesychia* there can be no action: without *hesychia* there can be no *praxis*. Without *hesychia*, salvation appears as a *chimera*, because man will never truly be “saved” or whole even if he appears momentarily to have reached salvation (*σῶσις*: etymologically the Greek word for salvation relates to wholeness); man without *hesychia* remains always fragmented and broken into pieces (despite appearances). In this way, Christian salvation ultimately depends on *hesychia*: without *hesychia*, man is not able to be saved in his entirety and wholeness.

Overall, within *cataphatic* or even *apophatic* academic theology, there is no essential justification for *hesychia* and *hesychasm*. The answer to the question of the necessity of *hesychia* for academic theology must be found in the form of *metatheology*, which is known only by and through ecclesiastical experience. Only there a relevant answer can be found because only there can one check and ascertain the essential relation of *hesychia* to the lived experience of Christianity, and, in particular, maintaining the double commandment of love. In this way, the ascetic experience of *hesychia* and *hesychasm* can be seen as a unique *metatheological* foundation of Christian theology.

If the first aim of theology is knowledge of God, i.e. *theognosia*, and if *theognosia* is the result of the loving communion of God and man, *hesychasm* (with *hesychia* as a practical tool but also as a fruit of *theognosia*), is *metatheologically* confirmed, i.e., it becomes one with the experiential and ontological originality of *theognosia*. The doctrine has a depth that cannot be measured nor calculated, as St John of the Ladder, the teacher of hesychasm, writes: The mind of the hesychast approaches doctrine with no peril; but going near it, without first removing the passions, is extremely dangerous (Ιω. Σιναΐτου, *Κλίμαξ* 27, 9; PG88, 1097C).

St Gregory the Theologian also alluded to this danger in his writings:

“Only a few can philosophise properly about God.... Because this is suited only to those who have examined their life and have lived their life having an experience of God, and before this experience they have struggled to cleanse their soul and body, or at least they try to do so, living a life in balance. Because it is not possible for the unclean to touch the clean, and if this is attempted, it is not safe to do so” (Γρηγορίου Θεολόγου, Λόγος 27 (Θεολογικός 1) 7; PG36, 13D).

Theology presupposes cleanliness in the relation and communion with the embodied *Logos* of God. According to St John of the Ladder, if the senses have not been cleansed and have not united in God’s way of being sensed, “it is difficult to talk about God”. Whoever talks about God in such a state “uses his own concepts and erudition to speak about God” (Ιω. Σιναΐτου, *Κλίμαξ* 30, 12-13; PG88, 1157C). A presupposition for theology, but also the true authentic theological state, is living one’s life with *hesychia*, chastity, and purity: “chastity and purity make a student a true theologian” (Ιω. Σιναΐτου, *Κλίμαξ*, *ibid*). Theology, as a state of mind and soul, can only be lived within the *hesychia* of the mind; the *hesychia* of the heart.

The “spiritual man”, St Paul the Apostle writes, “judges all, but cannot be questioned by anyone” because he has turned his “mind towards Christ” (1 Cor. 2:15). *Hesychia* of the mind makes transparent the mind of the *ascetic* and allows for an affinity towards and *oikeiosis* with the mind of Christ. With this gift, which operates within the body of Christ, His Church, the ecclesiastically experienced theologian makes his own witness and testimony in a cataphatic way, using always limited human reason and language to provide to all the transcendental truth of the Spirit.

It is of note that St Symeon the New Theologian, in his oration entitled *On Hesychia*, restricts his discussion, almost exclusively, to cases of people who forget about the world and its cares and dedicate themselves to Christ and His gifts. In this way, he refers to the prostitute, who made Jesus’ feet wet with her tears dedicating herself only to the One, Who could forgive her sins. St Symeon the New Theologian also reminds us of the case of the three disciples who followed Jesus to Mt Thabor and lived the remarkable experience of His Transfiguration. He also reminds us of the apostles’ remarkable experience of seeing their resurrected teacher appearing in front of them while being locked inside “because of the fear of the Jews”, and so on. These examples, St Symeon the New Theologian notes, must not only be considered descriptions of Jesus’ life by the hesychast but he must also pursue them and try to live them within himself. If this does not take place and the hesychast disregards the commandments and stops working with his body, he loses any opportunity to attain knowledge of how to work within his heart and mind, he stays

still in both his physical and his mental/spiritual dimension and, in this way, he commits a serious sin. If someone knows well how to struggle and work spiritually, his bodily activity of keeping the commandments is not stopped by his spiritual endeavours but rather his physical work is further supported and enabled. If someone limits his efforts only to bodily *ascesis*, there will come the time that, if he stops in his *ascesis* or reduces his efforts slightly, he will also lose all progress gained spiritually as well (Συμεών Νέου Θεολόγου, *Ηθικά* 15, 94 κ.ε. in Darrouzès 1967, p.450 and later).

St Gregory Palamas makes an important distinction in his work between the intellectual knowledge of God and the experiential knowledge of God, using the terms *θεολογία* (*theologia*, i.e., theology) and *θεοπτία* (*theoptia* or vision of God). He places particular emphasis on the fact that for him there is a great distance and a significant difference between *theologia* (theology) and *theoptia*: in *theoptia* there is a more profound sense of knowledge that is achieved in a truly enlightened state; in *theologia* knowledge is circumstantial and lacking in certainty. He uses the analogy of knowing about the existence of one thing as distinct from actually having it in one's hands and measuring it with one's senses. It is one thing to talk about God, and another to enter into communion with Him: "it is not the same thing to talk about a characteristic of God and to meet and know God Himself". Theology needs language and the art of speaking; it needs to use logic and appropriate reasoning, arguments, and proofs when one is to communicate his knowledge to others. This can be done by people with the wisdom of this world, who may not have the purity of soul and mind. But, for St Gregory Palamas, to acquire within himself an experiential knowledge of God and commune with Him and reflect His most pure light to the degree that this is possible in human nature cannot be done if one is not clean and engaged with the virtues or if he does not come out of his self and his powers, i.e., if he does not transcend himself (Γρηγορίου Παλαμά, *Υπέρ των ιερώς ησυχάζόντων* 1, 3, 42; Chrestou 1962, p.453).

This ecstatic character of *theoptia* is aligned to the ecstatic character of Christian anthropology. Man does not gain his true value if he does not become something superior to what he is. Man was not created by God to remain in the state he was created. He was created as man by nature so that he can become God by grace. What is considered "likeness of God" is the ecstatic measure and norm, which was provided at the time of his creation in his very nature for his fulfilment as a person and the realisation of the purpose of his existence.

This possibility of the ecstatic transcendence of human nature lies within human nature. It was stated from the moment of its creation by referring to its iconic character. Human nature is iconic (created to be the icon of God). This does not mean that human nature is not real. It is real and dynamic. This is the nature of a person. By this, we mean that its true reality, its truth, lies in direct relation to its absolute archetype, which lies outside its relational character. The truth of human nature is transcendental. It is related to true Being of which it is an icon.

Man has both an infinite and a poor, restricted, value. He is of infinite value when he keeps himself clean and reflects within himself the true Being, God. God is infinite by nature; man, being an icon of God, gains infinity by His grace. But when a man is unclean, i.e., clouded by sin, and loses his value, he can only have a restricted and poor value. He then gradually becomes clouded and loses any sense of value, because he destroys within himself his archetype, the Absolute and the Infinite.

St Ignatius the God-bearer writes: “It is better to be silent and exist than keep talking without existing... The one who has in his possession truly the word of Jesus can also listen to his own *hesychia*, so that he can exist as perfect as possible, and be known as such [to God], both in terms of what he says and does and in terms of the things he does not speak about” (Ιγνατίου Αντιοχείας, *Προς Εφεσίους* 15, 2).

Hesychastic theology listens to the *hesychia* of God. It performs the work of Mary, who was near the feet of Christ and listened to his teaching (Luke 10:39). But there is also academic theology, which performs the work of her sister Martha who was preoccupied with the dinner preparations for Christ (Luke 10:40). Without Martha’s work, there would be no dinner. Martha loved Christ, and so did Mary. But Jesus praised the behaviour of Mary, emphasising “that good part which shall not be taken away from her” (Αρχιμ. Σωφρονίου Σαχάρωφ 2013, p.182).

Academic theology has always been turned to the world and distracted by its tendency to serve the people (Luke 10:40). It affiliates itself to literature, history, philosophy, sociology, and anything else that it considers useful, such as science. It often works with a lot of worldly care for the preparation of the dinner of the Church, expressing sometimes, as Martha did, its resentment and exasperation about all those who behave like Mary in disregarding Jesus’ praise for her. Academic theology, while it performs the work of Martha, often wishes to appropriate the fruit of Mary’s work. It is for this reason that it often leads both the Church and the faithful astray.

The work of academic theology is useful and important when it restricts itself to serving the people and is carried out with a spirit of

humility. It researches and brings to the surface the life and tradition of the Church. But it becomes quite debatable and even dangerous when it is left to human pride and arbitrariness. It is of particular importance in not reducing the non-experiential theology to dangerous forms of idle talk. “Idle talk”, emphasises St Symeon the New Theologian, is not only “speaking without any benefit”, as a person may think, but also speaking about things that one has no personal experience about. For example, when someone teaches about the disregard of worldly praise, without himself disregarding it as harmful and without an experiential knowledge that it is an obstacle to acquiring “praise from above”, he not only talks idly, but he also lies about things he knows only superficially (Συμεών Νέου Θεολόγου, *Ηθικά* 1, 461-468; Darrouzès 1966, p.306).

Academic theology is founded on knowledge. And it is right when it is founded on the right knowledge. Experiential theology² is not founded on knowledge. It is founded on the light of God. Knowledge is not the light. But the light is true knowledge (“*Ἡ γνώσις οὐκ ἐστὶ τὸ φῶς, ἀλλὰ τὸ φῶς, ἡ γνώσις, ὑπάρχει*”, Συμεών Νέου Θεολόγου, *Κατηχήσεις* 28; Krivochéine, B., Paramelle, J., eds. 1965, σ. 146). Academic theology rests on solid foundations when it is founded on true knowledge of the light. This foundation enriches academic theology. Theologians who are versed in academic theology need to enrich their minds and theology with the theology of the light, which necessitates a form of communion with experiential theology: some form of *ascesis*, *kenosis* (emptying oneself from oneself) and obedience, so that it can bear fruit. Without this presupposition, theology becomes “idle talk” or even “false talk”. For St Diadochos of Photike “there is nothing poorer than a mind which even though not related to God is philosophising about God” (Διαδόχου Φωτικής, *Κεφάλαια γνωστικά* 7; εκδ. J. E. Weis-Liebersdorf, σ. 10). St Sophronios of Essex, noting the particular narrative of academic theology,

² Editor/Translator’s Note: “Experiential theology” here has nothing to do with what is known as *Experiential Theology* in the West, an idea put forward in its first form by the Protestant, Reformist, and Puritan, Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635-1711) in his *The Christian's Reasonable Service* (1700); in it, à Brakel claimed that the doctrines of the Bible should become a reality in the hearts and lives of believers by describing in detail what the experiential application of the doctrine should be and by describing what it is when believers struggle to live the message of the Bible; Mantzarides’ idea (influenced primarily by hesychastic and ecclesiological writings of the Fathers) in some other translations has been termed “empirical” theology (again, not a very good translation, because it has nothing to do with the philosophical movement of Empiricism in the 18th century and later, influencing primarily Protestant Theology).

writes: “True theology is not the fruit of human intellect, nor the result of critical studies but the revelation of the mystery regarding the superior Being that man can approach with grace from the Holy Spirit” (Αρχιμ. Σωφρονίου (Σαχάρωφ) 2003, p.212). For this reason, the real understanding of Church dogma can only be achieved with a “non-dogmatic” approach, i.e., through personal experience of this dogma within the mysteries of the Church.

In academic theology, there are two common tendencies: the conservative and the progressive. The “conservative” theologians with their sterile indecisiveness “speak an empty talk”. They cannot move towards or are even blocked from reaching out to the “divine fire” of *hesychia*. The “progressive” theologians, with their daring imagination and bold meditations, always try to be in “creative” accord with worldly society. If one sees academic theology in this way, one can understand that there is no “conservation” nor “progress” in true theology. The “fire of *hesychia*” will always be the focal point of real “conservation” and real “progress” in true theology. This is theology that aspires to acquire the position of Mary and not the position of Martha. Only Orthodox hesychasm can keep this fire burning and this fire is kept alive only through Orthodox hesychasm. The Church can find a solution to its problems only by approaching and partaking of this fire, only through its experience; hesychasm becomes then the only authentic source of meaningful change in the Church.

List of sources cited

- Darrouzès, J., ed., 1967, *Syméon le Nouveau Théologien, Traités Théologiques et Éthiques*, Paris: Sources Chrétiennes, vol. 129.
- Darrouzès, J., ed., 1966, *Syméon le Nouveau Théologien, Traités Théologiques et Éthiques*, Paris: Sources Chrétiennes, vol. 122.
- Krivochéine, B., Paramelle, J., eds., 1965, *Syméon le Nouveau Théologien: Catéchèses 23-34. Actions de grâces 1-2*, tome III, Paris: Sources Chrétiennes, vol. 113.
- Αρχιμ. Σωφρονίου (Σαχάρωφ), 2010, *Οψόμεθα τον Θεόν καθώς εστι, Έσσεξ Αγγλίας*: εκδ. Ι. Μονής Ιωάννου Βαπτιστή.
- Χρήστου, Π., εκδ., 1962, *Γρηγορίου του Παλαμά, Συγγράμματα*, τομ. 1, Θεσσαλονίκη.
- Αρχιμ. Σωφρονίου (Σαχάρωφ), 2013, *Οικοδομώντας τον ναό του Θεού μέσα μας και στους αδελφούς μας*, τομ. Α, Έσσεξ Αγγλίας: εκδ. Ι. Μ. Ιωάννου Βαπτιστή, σ. 182

- Αρχιμ. Σωφρονίου (Σαχάρωφ), 2003, *Ο άγιος Σιλουανός ο Αθωνίτης*, Έσσεξ Αγγλίας: εκδ. Ι. Μ. Ιωάννη Βαπτιστή.
- Μάγεντόρφ, Ιω., 1965, “Ήσυχασμός”, Αθήναι: *Θρησκευτική και Ηθική Εγκυκλοπαιδεία*, τομ. 6, στ. 83.